

AN ANALYSIS OF SPACE AND AN INVESTIGATION
INTO THE NATURE OF THE BLOCK-OUT
PROCESS IN MY CURRENT WORK

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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INTRODUCTION

This creative project in lieu of thesis came into being because I have been made aware during the course of my studies that I often see space differently than do other people, artists included. Naturally, I became curious as to why this was so, and this investigation of how I perceive space in my paintings is an attempt to answer that question.

The process of applying an undercoat and then finishing by blocking out certain areas with an opaque layer of paint also interested me. I had been using this process for several years and wondered how I decided when to start the final layer of paint and what to block out. Therefore, a portion of this investigation concerns that process.

PROCESS OF DATA COLLECTION

The collection of data for the analyses which follow is in two parts. The questions which deal with the block-out process were answered by reviewing in-process slides or photographs. These were taken before the block-out process was begun on each painting and at various points during the block-out process. An example of these photographs taken for the painting entitled Tropical Summer is in Appendix A. The questions regarding the effect of overlapping, shape size, color and value upon the figure to ground relationship were answered from a visual analysis of the finished paintings.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The purpose of the creative project was to investigate the relationship of figure to ground in a series of paintings in order to better understand how I perceive the space in my work and to analyze the block-out process. Questions regarding the figure/ground relationship are as follow:

1. What is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous as I see it?
2. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

The portion of the investigation concerning the block-out process has two questions. They are as follow:

1. How do I begin the block-out process?
2. How do I decide what to block out?

A definition of the terms used repeatedly in this investigation is in order. "Block-out" refers to an opaque layer of paint that is applied last and actually does block from view portions of the undercoat layer of paint. This phrase is sometimes used as a noun, an adjective or a verb and always refers to the layer of paint or the act of applying that layer of paint. "Undercoat" refers to the initial layer or layers of transparent or translucent paint applied previous to the block-out.

The first question contains the key to this problem. That is the phrase, "...as I see it." This is an investigation into my own way of seeing my art. At first I thought that I should document all the rules concerning how one is supposed to see. But in doing this I found a very concrete example of something I had long suspected. I do not always see as I am "supposed to."

Here is that example, taken from Art, Perception and Reality:

In general, the brain fields will (presumably) organize themselves in the simplest (most economical) way possible, and knowledge of this fact permits us to predict how any picture will be perceived. Particular rules of organization can be extracted: for example, that we will see those shapes that are as symmetrical as possible (e.g. X rather than Y in figures 2a (i), (ii), "the law of symmetry");¹

Well, I saw Y rather than X in both examples. So I concluded that since my way of seeing space is a personal one, my investigation would have to be limited to my own perceptions.

¹E. H. Gombrich, Julian Hochberg, and Max Black, Art, Perception and Reality (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), p. 53.

THE ANALYSES

Painting Number One, The Fetus is a Parasite

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

In this painting the block-out layer of paint stays entirely in the background and never even hints at coming forward to act as figure. There therefore is no spatial ambiguity due to the location of the block-out being in question. Any spatial ambiguity comes from the arrangement of the undercoat figures on the ground.

2. How do I begin the block-out process? How do I decide what to block out?

I began the block-out process after thoroughly covering the canvas with undercoating. I can come up with no other reason for having started when I did except that one stage seemed to be finished and the other needed to begin. A thorough study of the in-process slides yields no more than this.

What to block out proceeded like many paintings to come. Less pleasing shapes were slowly eliminated until it seemed that it would "kill" the painting to eliminate any more shapes.



Fig. 1. The Fetus is a Parasite

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the relationship of figure to ground?

Overlapping

The block-out never gives the impression of overlapping the undercoat although it does so physically, as it was applied last. In the largest shape there appears to be overlapping of one undercoat figure onto another where a ribbonlike shape filled with dots to the right seems to cross over or to melt into the largest shape. This creates some spatial ambiguity since it is not certain where the large shape lies in relation to the ribbonlike shape.

Shape size

The real spatial ambiguity comes into play because of shape size. Since the figures float on the ground due to the overall sameness of the ground, the sizes of the shapes become attention-getters. Where are they in relation to each other? Are the smallest shapes the furthest away and the larger shapes nearer? Or, are they just different sizes?

Color

Color gives no clue as to the location of the shapes in relation to each other since they are similar throughout the figures. It does play the expected role in that the ground is overall a cooler color than the figures. Therefore, the figures are enhanced in their coming forward by being generally warmer in color.

Value

In this painting value plays its usual role in that the ground is consistently darker than the overall value of the figures. There are small areas within the figures which may be as dark or darker than the ground, but they work as parts of whole shapes within the lighter valued figures. Had the ground been consistently lighter than the figures, the result would have been the same as my in-process slides show. (The ground was a very light beige at first.) The key is a consistent treatment of the ground which renders it flat and on the same plane at all times.

Painting Number Two, The Purple Failure

This painting was included as an example of what happens when too many shapes are eliminated and the spatial, tensional force is destroyed.

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This painting is like the first in that the ground, or block-out, remains on one plane and for the same reasons. There is one possible exception. At times the purple seems to come forward at the point between the two ribbons joining into the largest shape.² It only happens briefly; most of the time that part remains in the background.

²Interestingly enough Graham Collier sees this way, also. He says it like this, "skeletal form is always perceived together with its ground." in Form, Space and Vision (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 36.



Fig. 2. The Purple Failure

2. How do I begin the block-out process? How do I decide what to block out?

These questions cannot be answered precisely from any study of the in-process slides. With the last seven paintings the process was documented in a journal along with the photos to see if this would yield more decipherable data, but it did not. In "Purple Failure" the only apparent answers are like those for the first painting. The block-out is started after a sufficiently rich undercoat has been applied. The least exciting or appealing shapes are eliminated first, and the process is continued until the painting seems finished. Only in this case the block-out was carried too far, destroying the tensional interplay of the juxtaposed forms; and the painting is a failure by my standards.

3. What effect do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

At all times the figures, which are comprised of undercoating, visually overlap the purple block-out layer of paint, and no ambiguity exists. The figures do not overlap one another.

Shape Size

The figures are very close in size, especially in width, and consequently not much ambiguity exists. If it were solely dependant upon shape size, these shapes would probably be on nearly the same plane. But color and value play significant parts in this painting.

Color

In the upper right-hand corner lie two shapes of similar size but different color and value. The slightly smaller shape comes closer than the larger one, because it is red and yellow and the other is blueish. This conforms to the widely agreed and universally accepted idea that warm colors advance and cool colors recede. The other shapes in this painting are warm colors and lie on approximately the same plane. However, in the opposite lower left corner a small blueish shape seems to come forward as compared to the larger pink, yellow, orange and lime ribbon shape near it. This has to do with value.

Value

The dark value of the blueish shape in the lower left corner overpowers the larger, paler shape and advances in space solely due to its great disparity in value from the ground or the paler shape.³

Painting Number Three, The Open Meadow

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This is the most spatially complex painting thus far. The undercoat is in places ground to the block-out's figure and other times figure to the block-out's ground.

³Again, Graham Collier agrees with me. He says that, "projection is achieved when the tone (dark or light) of an area or line (called "the figure") is in strong contrast to the tone of the ground." in Form, Space and Vision (p. 18).



Fig. 3. The Open Meadow

The largest area of undercoat, which is in the upper center of this painting, is the deepest space in the painting. Parts of the undercoat are figure and parts are ground. The yellow band across the top is the most distant ground and the red and turquoise shapes are the nearest forms within the area. Winding up and off the top edge of the painting, this same area has vertical stripes of the block-out acting as figure. These parallel same-sized stripes seem, if the painting is read from the center upwards, to be behind the large, open, central area. But in the context of the painting as a whole, they flip back and forth from very deep space to free floating fingers which cannot be placed in space. Coming down toward the bottom of the painting from the center, a repetition of these same block-out parallel stripes are positively and consistently figure to the block-out's ground.

The rest of the time the block-out acts as ground to the shapes formed by the undercoat.

2. How do I begin the block-out process? How do I decide what to block out?

In this painting the block-out seemed to begin at the edges and move inward. Primarily I outlined shapes I wanted to keep, which turned out to be mostly turquoise and pink. After outlining these shapes, I filled in between them with block-out paint to simplify the surface and to create resting spaces for the eyes. But as I neared the large, open center, doubts came as to what needed to be eliminated. So I left it and went away for a few hours. Upon returning I saw that

this worked beautifully and decided to refine the edges by painting a bit more block-out. The last touch was the addition of the "fingers" of block-out at the top and bottom of the large open area.

3. What effect do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

Along both the left and right sides and bottom, the undercoat shapes seem to overlap the field of dark grey block-out, and for this reason are figure. However, because they are smaller, enclosed shapes, the previously mentioned finger-like shapes of block-out seem to overlap and consequently become figure to the large central undercoat shape.

In this painting whether the block-out is figure or ground depends heavily upon the appearance of overlapping.

Shape Size

The sizes of the shapes work in the usual manner; smaller shapes recede and larger shapes advance, except where otherwise overruled by color, value or overlapping. These instances are discussed in the appropriate sections.

Color

Color does not do anything unusual in this painting except in the large, open, central undercoat area. Around the sides and bottom where the figures are formed by the undercoat, the colors do as expected because the figures are warmer colors than the cool, grey background. This is

enhanced by other factors as well. However, in the large undercoat shape the colors do not obey what seem to be the natural laws. If this shape can be viewed by itself for a moment, it is seen that there is a landscape effect in which the sky is yellow and recedes behind smaller shapes of many colors including cooler blues and purples. This takes place in part because of our visual orientation to the landscape. Where there is a horizon line, the upper seems behind the lower. Partly the yellow recedes because of being overlapped by enclosed shapes.

Value

Value does not do anything unusual in this painting as it is consistently overpowered by overlapping.

Painting Number Four, Pirate's Map

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This painting is similar to the preceding one both in its uses of color and resultant spatial arrangements. The block-out color remains in the background except where it is applied as dotted lines and in one case as a row of parallel finger-like shapes on the right-hand side. On the left-hand side extending from the bottom to about four-fifths of the way up is an area of exposed undercoat which acts as ground to both two sets of the aforementioned dotted lines and two long, slightly curved extensions of the block-out color.

⁴I find that where smaller shapes are enclosed by larger ones, the smaller shape is figure.



Fig. 4. Pirate's Map

2. How do I begin the block-out process? How do I decide what to block-out?

With this painting I began the block-out as with most of the others; when a sufficiently complex undercoating had been built up and most of the surface of the canvas had been covered. What to block out proceeded much as in the manner of painting number three. I started with the least pleasing or most disturbing elements and obliterated them with the block-out color.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

Where the block-out "dots" and "fingers" overlap, the larger areas of undercoating, they become figure. Otherwise the block-out is ground.

Shape size

Because they are small enclosed shapes, the rows of dots and fingers of block-out paint are positive space or figure even though the rest of the block-out of identical color, value and intensity is negative space or ground. The undercoat shapes are smaller overall than the block-out, which extends off the canvas into infinity suggesting a greater area, so this partially explains why these undercoat shapes are figure. But color and value determine much in this painting.

Color

The colors in the undercoat are predominately warm and of a high intensity.⁵ Since the block-out is a cooler color and lower in intensity, it follows easily that it moves back into a ground position.

Value

When small enclosed shapes of high intensity and warmer color are also of a lighter value and the enclosing shape or shapes are consistently of a darker value, the absoluteness of the positive and negative spatial differentiation is enhanced.

Painting Number Five, X on White

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This is a very simple one. The undercoat is figure; the block-out is ground.

2. How do I begin the block-out process? How do I decide what to block out?

Boredom prevailed with this painting. I considered destroying it at one point; but once the block-out was finished, I liked it better. Using my entire arm, moving mostly from the shoulder rather than at the wrist or elbow, I quickly drew several drybrush lines. I selected a few to keep and outlined them with block-out paint about one inch

⁵As most other people do, I perceive intense colors as being nearer and less intense colors as being farther away. This has to do, I am sure, with the way atmospheric conditions of the earth dull colors and values at greater distances.



Fig. 5. X on White

away from the drybrush lines in order to keep some of the undercoat showing. I then filled in the remaining space with block-out. I studied the painting and then finished by breaking up some of the lines by slicing into them with the block-out paint.

3. What effect do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The block-out was applied last and therefore actually overlaps the undercoat, but does not visually do so because of the sizes of the shapes.

Shape Size

All the undercoat shapes are enclosed and lie above the surface created by the all white block-out.

Color

The figures of undercoating are predominately warmer than the blocked out portion. The role played by color, however, is a minor one.

Value

Value is not nearly as important here as shape. Shape overrules color, value and overlapping totally in this painting. The disparity between the light value of the white block out and the dark values of the undercoat creates a strong separation between figure and ground.

Painting Number Six, Here Comes Austin

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This is another easy separation of figure and ground. At all times the undercoat is figure and the block-out is ground.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

The block-out started after the picture plane was entirely covered with undercoating. I painted around certain undercoat shapes which I chose to retain. Then I filled in much of what seemed to be negative space (ground) with the block-out paint and continued doing this and eliminating unnecessary shapes until the right balance between positive and negative space came to be.

3. What effect do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The block-out never visually overlaps the undercoat. The paint remains opaque and does not give the impression of overlapping.

Shape Size

Once again, the undercoat's smaller enclosed shapes remain in the fore, shoving the larger, enclosing block-out into the background.



Fig. 6. Here Comes Austin

Color

Intensity aids in pulling the shapes of undercoat forward from the deep dark space of the painting's almost colorless block-out.

Value

The extremes of value between the positive and negative space help in the bold separation between the two.

Painting Number Seven, East Beach

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground, and what is ambiguous in this painting?

The block-out is ground and the undercoat is figure. There are no spatial ambiguities.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decided what to block out?

The surface of the painting was not completely covered with undercoat when I started painting in a pale orange block-out. The block-out color was not right somehow; so I changed it to an intense, hot orange. After I covered most of the area to be blocked, the orange seemed wrong. I began blocking out again with a sand colored paint, which worked. After the orange had been replaced by the sand color, some of the shapes I had initially liked did not seem to work, so they were eliminated. The last shapes to be painted out were eliminated with thinned paint which gave them the effect of shadows, because they were still slightly visible.



Fig. 7. East Beach

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The block-out does not give the illusion of overlapping the figures (or undercoating) in this painting. The positive shapes (or figures) do not overlap each other, either.

Shape Size

As in most of the paintings in this series, the undercoat shapes which are smaller and enclosed by the block-out color appear to be in the foreground.

Color

Color slightly enhances the separation between figure and ground in this painting, in the green and yellow shapes especially.

Value

Where color does not separate figure and ground, value does it. The spatial separation is aided in the neutral and the cool colored forms by either extremely light or extremely dark values.

Painting Number Eight, Tropical Summer

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

At first glance the undercoat is figure and the block-out is ground. Soon, however, the small areas of pale undercoat acting as ground to the darker, more intense

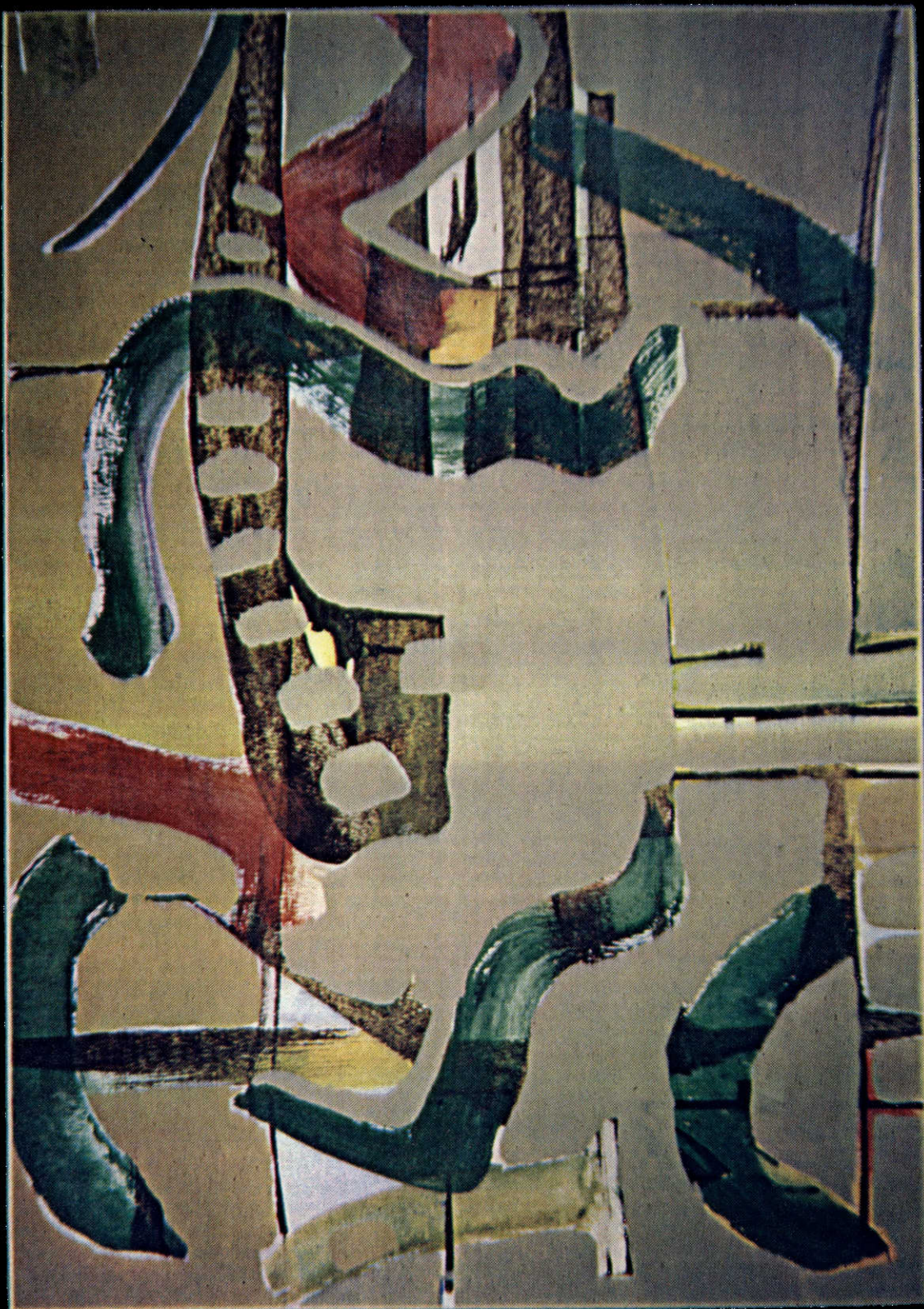


Fig. 8. Tropical Summer

undercoat shapes are noticed. The two most prominent ones are a blue area on the upper left side and near the edge and a pink area of similar size near the right edge and slightly lower than the blue. These are the deepest spaces in this painting. The block-out near these areas remains ground to the other undercoat shapes, but is not so deep into space. In a few places the block-out becomes figure. They are all close to each other in approximately the upper right quarter of the picture plane. There are two wavy lines running parallel to one green and one red undercoat shape. There also is a row of dots across a brown undercoat shape which become figure.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

The picture plane was entirely covered with undercoat before I started the block-out. The block-out process began at the lower left, moved right and then up. The block-out went very quickly with very little deliberation. The two previously mentioned wavy lines and the row of block-out dots which constitute figure were painted in last.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The most noticeable place that visual overlapping takes place is where the two wavy lines of block-out emerge from the larger field of block-out to overlap the undercoat

in the upper right quarter. The block-out seems to overlap the two pale previously mentioned areas of overcoat which appear to be the deepest space in this painting as well.

Shape Size

The two rows of dots become figure because they are smaller than the undercoat shape which encloses them.

Color

The red and green undercoat shapes are the nearest in space due to their color intensity and warmth. It is interesting to note that there are two undercoat shapes which are difficult to place in space. Their spatial location in relation to the other undercoat shapes and their relative distance from the block-out is difficult to ascertain as they are not only of similar color, but of almost identical value to the block-out. One shape is running off the top right-hand edge. The other is near the center on the left-hand side. Both are a yellow beige.

Value

Where the value of the undercoat figures is close to the value of the block-out, the space is shallow. Where the values are most different, the deepest space occurs.

Painting Number Nine, Watermelon Rind

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

Once again no ambiguous shapes or space were created



Fig. 9. Watermelon Rind

for this painting. The figures are all undercoat and the ground is all block-out.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

This painting was done differently than all the other paintings insofar as the shapes which are figure are all that were on the picture plane when I began the blocking out process. I quickly painted some ribbons of color on this one and then just filled in the remaining areas of white, or negative space, with the block-out.

3. What effect do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

This is another simple case of block-out remaining in the background and undercoat being the foreground.

Shape Size

The undercoat figures remain on top in part because they are smaller, enclosed shapes.

Color

The warmth and intensity of the colors in the undercoat contrasted against the cool, duller colors of the block-out accentuate the spatial division between figure and ground. An example of the reverse is an inconspicuous little row of square dots at the lower right corner. The color is cool and lacks intensity, and the dots move back in space to lie very near the surface of the block-out.

Value

Color and value work in tandem here. Where the colors are intense and warm, the values are bright, further encouraging the figures to come forward in space. Where the colors are cool and dull, the value is nearer middle grey.

Painting Number Ten, Hurricane

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This one is deliciously complex in the interplay between figure and ground. It is difficult from the very beginning to place every form in space. What seems to be figure turns out to be ground, or is it? Some shapes are negative space (ground) one minute and positive space the next. The movement from one place to another is delightful and ambiguous.

Starting from the top the blue block-out is in the background except for several small ribbons, zig-zags and dotted lines painted over the positive space formed by the undercoat. This is a seascape of sorts and where the water should be the block-out is especially ambiguous spatially. Most of it lies behind the shapes formed by the undercoat, but along the horizon line little spikes of the block-out stick up over the undercoat to behave like figure. All around this place little dotted lines of block-out jump up out of the water and into the sky to merge with the block-out there, or plunge back into the water like the imaginary trail of a jumping fish. Just below center on the right a



Fig. 10. Hurricane

human-like shape emerges from the lower block-out with arms outstretched and face upturned. It is definitely figure over the undercoat's ground.

Along the bottom, block-out of a slightly lighter value underlines many of the undercoat's positive shapes to become positive shapes themselves. Here block-out is figure and ground to itself by virtue of a slight value change. Above the human-like block-out shape is a small brown cloud of undercoat paint lying on top of a field of undercoat. This is an example of undercoat being both figure and ground to itself.

On the left side are two maroon shapes. These are left-overs from the original block-out color. In space they are unique. The higher one is behind the undercoat shapes around it, both the pale blue and the hot yellow. It is also behind the grey block-out zig-zags. The other maroon shape near it, however, is closer in space. It is in front of the pale blues and hot yellow, but behind the grey block-out at the bottom and the tiny marching parallel lines of block-out across the top of the shape.

The yellows are on different planes. The three yellows running along the right side are behind the other undercoat shapes as well as behind the block-out, which overlaps just slightly into these yellows. The two yellow oranges in the bottom center are figure, but the one yellow orange at the middle left is figure on its left-hand edge and becomes ground on the right-hand edge.

In the lower right the block-out comes up like a cloud and lies in front of the lavender undercoat as a final example of block-out's becoming positive space.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

The undercoat covered most, but not all, of the picture plane when I started blocking out. Initially the block-out went into the white, unpainted, negative spaces; but eventually it spread to cover some of the undercoat. In the beginning the block-out was various shades of reds and reddish purples with few beiges. It reached a completed stage and stayed that way for several days. I tacked it up on the wall. Something was not quite right, so I began to change the block-out to two greys. The sky became a blueish grey and the water a greener shade of the same value of grey. A few small areas of the original maroon block-out were left showing.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The section on overlapping was created in anticipation of paintings such as this one. There are several instances of the block-out's overlapping onto the undercoat in such a way as to become figure. All the rows of parallel lines, dotted lines, zig-zags and floating ribbons of block-out lying atop the undercoat do so because overlapping and

shape size work together. But where the human-like figure comes up from the water, it advances in space due to overlapping. At the bottom right corner the cloud shape of block-out comes forward over the undercoat shapes, because it appears to overlap them.

Shape Size

The shape sizes act in an interesting fashion in the lower right corner. The block-out and undercoat shapes both are about the same size. Neither encloses more than the other; and therefore if looked at as a unit, separate from the rest of the painting, it is impossible to tell which is figure and which is ground. Only in the context of the entire painting is this resolved. The upper block-out becomes ground and the lower is still ambiguous, staying figure to the undercoat's ground most of the time. The same block-out, however, just to the left of the undercoat configuration is definitely in the background and never comes forward.

Color

The normal procedure of warm colors coming forward and cool ones receding is reversed in a few places in this painting. The brightest, warmest colors in this painting are shoved into negative space because of the handling of shape size and overlapping. Only two areas of this yellow and yellow orange are positive space. They are at the lower left near the center.

The relationship between the sky and water is titillated by the nearer color being cooler. The blueish grey sky has some red mixed into it, and the blueish grey water has some yellow. The sky is warmer; however, it still recedes.

The maroon shapes left over from the initial block-out keep trying to come forward due to their warmth, but they fail to do so because of overlapping and shape size. One maroon shape actually does come in front of a brighter yellow along its upper edge. The maroon shape is aided by its overlapping the yellow, but it comes forward only because it is warmer than the neighboring block-out color.

Value

Value is helpful in placing everything spatially in this painting. However, sometimes it is overruled by overlapping, shape size or color. The undercoat is consistently much lighter in value than the block-out. At a glance one can see which is undercoat and which is block-out. But value cannot rescue the undercoat where it becomes negative space as discussed in "Color" above.

Painting Number Eleven, Harry's Duck

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

This is another highly complex painting. The block-out does not stay in one place. There are three shades of block-out. When these are placed next to each other, then



Fig. 11. Harry's Duck

one must be figure and the other ground. This happens in the sky of Harry's Duck three times. The blueish lavender block-out from the earth comes above the horizon line to form a positive shape against the darker reddish lavender block-out of the sky. The lower block-out forms a cloud over the lighter lavender in the sky. The same darker reddish lavender makes another cloud in the top right corner. In the top left corner the orange undercoat is negative space because of the shape which the block-out takes around it. In the lower left corner the block-out plays a role of positive space over the undercoat for a while; but as the eye moves to the right, the block-out becomes negative space. Another place where the block-out is figure and should not be is about five inches up from the lower right corner and one inch in from the right side. A ribbon of dark blue suddenly turns grey. At the same point the block-out overlaps the ribbon of undercoat in just the right way so as to become figure briefly.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

This painting was largely covered with undercoat. Perhaps one-sixth of the surface was unpainted. The block-out started in that empty, white negative space. The block-out was initially two colors, green at the bottom and blue at the top. The green was rather opaque, but the blue was somewhat transparent. This was almost finished when I

was overcome by a loathing for the block-out and certain undercoat details. I started all over again with lavender and repainted the block-out, leaving a little of the blue in the sky, and eliminating some undesirable details.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

As Hurricane, Harry's Duck is greatly affected by overlapping. Where the dark part of the sky is in front of the lighter, it is due to overlapping. The dark overlaps the light. In the upper left corner overlapping is responsible for the small orange strip's seeming to be behind the pink sky. The duck-like blueish lavender of the water which comes up into the sky seems to be in front because it overlaps the sky color. On the left-hand side near the edge, the water unexpectedly comes forward over the lower edge of a small grey strip because it overlaps. A grey cloud shape in the upper center is overlapped at the top but not at the bottom by sky, and therefore its location in space is somewhat ambiguous. The long diagonal line of block-out running off the lower left corner is in front because it overlaps and because of its size.

Shape Size

The aforementioned diagonal line is the only example of the block-out's being in front because of shape size. It is completely enclosed by undercoat. Shape size is in many

cases not keeping the undercoat figures to the fore. The block-out's obvious overlaps push them back. So a constant see-saw in location takes place. One's eyes cannot believe that these colorful ribbons floating about are background, yet the background overlaps them from time to time.

Color

The brightest and warmest colors are in the undercoat and aid in the fight of the shapes to come forward.

Value

The values in the undercoat which are darkest and lightest are the ones which seem farthest from the block-out when they are seen as figure.

Painting Number Twelve, Aerial View

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

Undercoat is figure and block-out is ground at all times excluding the tiny dots of yellow in the block-out formed by bubbles popping in the block-out as it dried. These can only be seen at very close range.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

I started this block-out like many others before it by outlining the shapes I wanted to retain from the undercoat. Then I filled in the spaces between the block-out outlines. Next I stood back and studied the painting.



Fig. 12. Aerial View

Slowly I eliminated those shapes which seemed superfluous or obstructive to the tensional interplay between shapes. I waited a while and repainted the entire block-out a darker shade of the same color.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

The block-out never appears to overlap the undercoat.

Shape Size

The small, enclosed shapes of the undercoat consistently are on top of the larger, enclosing block-out shape.

Color

The undercoat shapes are usually more intense colors than the blockout, which keeps them in front whether they are warmer or cooler than the block-out.

Value

The value of the undercoat is consistently lighter than that of the block-out and also helps to keep these shapes in the foreground.

Painting Number Thirteen, Reality Versus the Dream

1. As I see it, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

Figure in this painting consists of the undercoat peeping through in the top and all the undercoat in the



Fig. 13. Reality Versus the Dream

bottom. The undercoat in the bottom rather lies on a different plane from that in the top half, but still comes forward. This happens despite the overlapping of the block-out along the upper edge of the lower half. This, of course, leaves the block-out as the ground in most places. However, some spatial ambiguity exists in the block-out as a result of the block-out's not being all one value. The block-out includes all the orange and brownish orange areas except for the cloud by virtue of my definition of the block-out, which is "...an opaque layer of paint that is applied last," (see page 3). The key word is "last" because as the block-out began to evolve from one solid flat color which usually stayed on the same plane to a multi-valued coat of paint containing its own spatial interplays, the best way to discern between undercoat and block-out became the sequence of application.

Within the block-out itself are many planes. The orange near the top seems at first glance to be the farthest distance until I look at the dark brown along the bottom which zips backwards into a deeper space. This is confusing within the context of the rest of the painting. The most obvious ambiguity is at the center where the figure sits with his arm about a cloud. Figure, cloud and background are all variations of the block-out. Figure and cloud seem to compete for spatial frontality.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

The block-out was started after an undercoat had been applied to most of the upper half of the painting, and all of the still visible undercoat of the bottom half had been applied.

What I blocked out depended upon what shapes displeased me. I knew immediately that I wanted to keep the large, smooth lines in the lower front, so I started the block-out process by outlining this shape and then moving upward from that point. In the upper section I moved more cautiously and first blocked out shapes which please least, following with shapes that tended to contribute little to the form.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

Although the block-out physically overlaps the undercoat in other paintings, it has usually remained in the background. In Reality Versus the Dream it does remain in the background except at the point where it touches the upper edge of the large, smooth, linear shape in the bottom half of the painting. In the upper right corner one area of block-out overlaps a blueish green shape so as to come forward slightly. There is a constant shift between the block-out and the blueish green shape in space. Both are figure, but the undercoat is ground on its right side where

the overlapping block-out touches it.

Shape Size

Shape size behaves in the usual manner. Smaller shapes lie atop larger ones.

Color

Color is somewhat reversed. Warm colors are forced usually to remain in the distance because of the treatment of shape size, overlapping and value. Cool colors come forward for the same reasons.

Value

Probably value plays its most important role here in the block-out. Changing values cause many ambiguities within the block-out where both figure and ground come into being. If the value remained constant, the block-out would be consistently ground.

Painting Number Fourteen, Dirty Little Rainbow

1. As I see, what is figure, what is ground and what is ambiguous in this painting?

Dirty Little Rainbow is difficult indeed to discuss in terms of the location of each shape in space. It is not a painting wherein all the block-out is negative space and all the figures are pieces of the undercoat. In the top part of this painting the block-out remains in the background until the eye moves down to the point below the rainbow. Then the block-out begins to change color and value



Fig. 14. Dirty Little Rainbow

enough to come forward and overlap itself visually. In the bottom two-thirds the block-out is both figure and ground due to its constantly changing shades. The undercoat shapes are usually figure, with a few exceptions such as the small green piece three inches from the right edge near the center. This is because the block-out was applied slightly thinned and became translucent, thereby overlapping the undercoat at this point.

2. How do I begin the block-out? How do I decide what to block out?

This time the undercoat covered only about half the area of the painting when I began blocking out. Intuitively, I started blocking out at the top with only a desire to preserve the rainbow and a few other undercoat shapes which seemed to work well with it. Toward the bottom I became involved in the process to the extent that I was not making decisions as much as I was feeling my way along, mixing the paint as I went. This block-out went more the way undercoat usually goes insofar as it was a wonderfully spontaneous event. The outcome was almost a surprise.

3. What effects do overlapping, shape size, color and value have upon the figure/ground relationship?

Overlapping

There is much translucency in the undercoat and some in the block-out. Therefore, the overlapping of one color over another becomes important. Where any given color was

applied over another already dry or nearly dry, the color lying physically underneath is also visually underneath. Examples are the two shapes, one yellow, one red, which soar upwards near the center and are overlapped by the large, translucent rainbow shape. These shapes appear to be behind the rainbow, for the reason already given. In a few small places in the bottom section, the block-out goes translucent over the undercoat forming shapes of positive space rather than becoming negative space behind the remaining smaller, enclosed shapes of undercoat.

Shape Size

Except where translucency overrides, shape size follows the usual pattern, meaning that small, enclosed shapes lie atop larger, enclosing ones.

Color

The undercoat's being intense in color and lighter in value has more to do with the undercoat shapes coming forward in this painting than does warmth of color. The undercoat shapes are as often cool as warm. They usually remain foreground because they are small, enclosed shapes and because they are of much lighter values than the block-out's various shades. In the bottom the block-out is actually a warmer color than the undercoat except for the big red shape. But, again, the warmth of the color has not the impact that shape size, value or overlapping have.

Value

Value is covered in "Color" above.

CONCLUSION

Two discoveries came about while I was in the process of collecting the data for this problem. The first discovery regarded the source of the block-out process which was under scrutiny. It became apparent to me that it was a logical extension from another medium. A few years ago I was involved for a period of time with etchings. While doing aquatints, I became fascinated by the forms created by the asphaltum on the zinc plates when I blocked out various portions of the negative space to protect it from the etch of the acid bath. The block-out process in my paintings apparently originated from this process.

The second discovery, and the more important one, came as I analyzed a painting which I considered to be a failure. I was attempting to determine why it was a failure when I saw something that I had never before seen in my paintings. The Purple Failure (Fig. 2) did not work because the tension set up between the shapes in the other paintings was absent. The lack of tension in the empty spaces deprived the work of a certain energy that the other paintings possessed.

Understanding this quality of my art opened a door between my speculations about the nature of existence and my art that had heretofore been closed to me. In the past I had painted while in what is best described as an altered state

awareness. Apparently I am not alone. Marcel Duchamp, the artists' artist, reports:

To all appearances the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.⁶

And A. Kedeule reports that this is somewhat the way in which he discovered the benzene ring structure:

My spirit was with other things. I turned my chair to the fireplace and sank into a half-sleep. Again the atoms flitted before my eyes....Long rows, variously, more closely united; all in movement, wriggling and turning like little snakes. And see, what was that? One of the snakes seized its own tail and the image whirled scornfully before my eyes. As though from a flash of lightning I awoke; this time again I occupied the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis.⁷

Never had I doubted the validity of my work because of its being born during this different state of awareness. But coming to know that the emptiness, or negative space, in my paintings echoes the energy field concept which I hold to be true for all supposedly empty space came as a pleasant surprise.⁸ I understood suddenly that for years I had been painting about the ultimate mystery, the question, "What is existence?"

⁶Gregory Battcock, ed., The New Art, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1966), p. 23.

⁷Anthony Campbell, Seven States of Consciousness, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Perennial Library, 1974), p. 139.

⁸The energy field theory simply stated is that ultimately no particles of matter will be discovered by the physicists. I hold that nothing actually exists except for energy moving around in space.

This discovery put into a fresh perspective a quotation from Erich Neumann which has been on my studio wall for years.

The need of his times works inside the artist without his wanting it, seeing it, or understanding its true significance. In this sense he is close to the seer, the prophet, the mystic. And it is precisely when he does not represent the existing canon but transforms and overturns it that his function rises to the level of the sacral, for he then gives utterance to the authentic and direct revelation of the numinosum.⁹

⁹Erich Neumann, Art and the Creative Unconscious, trans. Ralph Manheim, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 97.

APPENDIX A TROPICAL SUMMER

Photographs taken during
the block-out process

A. The undercoat before
any block-out paint
was applied.

B. The block-out color
has been started.

A.*B.*

C. More block-out has
been applied.

D. The finished painting
before the tape around
the edges was removed.

c.



d.



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